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## MICHIGAN REPORT

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[Article taken by MDCR from full GONGWER Michigan  
report for Tuesday, March 29, 2005]

### CIVIL RIGHTS FOCUSING ON SEGREGATION BATTLE

Whether by residents' choice or design – or some of both – Michigan is one of the most racially segregated states in the nation. Civil Rights Director Linda Parker is hoping to use her second year in office to find out why and what can be done to reverse the trend.

“Segregation in Michigan is just at a profound level,” Ms. Parker said in a recent interview with Gongwer News Service.

And she said nearly all of the racial issues the department is addressing can, at some level, be seen as a symptom of or result of that segregation.

Between 1980 and 2000, Michigan was one of only seven states to see racial segregation increase in its communities, Ms. Parker said, noting that the other six were southern states.

All of the reasons for the racial groupings are not yet clear, Ms. Parker said, but she said discrimination in lending and in real estate offerings are still issues in the state. Of the 2,000 complaints filed last year, 150 were housing complaints, she said.

“Housing discrimination is a huge issue,” she said. Real estate agents will still aim customers toward communities or areas of communities inhabited by people of their own color, she said.

Tim Kissman, communications director for the Michigan Association of Realtors, said his organization also works to be sure members are aware of what constitutes housing discrimination and are trained how to avoid being or appearing discriminatory. And he said the association was making additional efforts at outreach with fair housing month coming next month.

And Ms. Parker said many people of color are forced into lower priced housing or prevented from purchasing a home at all, despite having sufficient income to afford a home. "People of color are not able to get lending rates that are commensurate with their white counterparts," she said. "Ownership of a home is a key path to financial independence."

But Don Heikkinen with the Michigan Bankers Association said banks do not engage in such behavior. "There's no excuse for that, no reason for that," he said. "We try to help our members avoid that."

Mr. Heikkinen said the state had stopped in the past 10 years collecting reports on bank mortgages because over some 20 years the reports showed no indications of racial discrimination in those loans. But he said the market for mortgages has also changed significantly in the past five or 10 years with mortgages available from a wider variety of lenders.

Ms. Parker said the studies, particularly on financing, are national studies. The goal over the next year is to determine how closely Michigan tracks to those national studies.

Among other efforts, the department will be conducting hearings and events around the state as well as bringing a variety of experts to the commission to discuss the issue.

The department is planning a civil rights summit this fall as well as an April 7 conference on emerging communities. The April conference will look at discrimination and segregation of such groups as those with disabilities and gays and lesbians, she said.

"We know the effects and we really want to examine more closely the causes (of segregation)," Ms. Parker said.

Among the outcomes: children not prepared for the workplace, she said. "Children are coming from residential communities where most of the residents look like them; they go to schools where most of the residents look like them," she said. "All these young people are going into the workplace ill-equipped to deal with the diversity you will ultimately find."

In some communities, it will mean segregation in the workplace as well, which she said will reduce companies' ability to compete in the global economy. "We cannot afford to bring into the market a very, very narrow perspective," she said.

She heralded the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce meeting on Mackinac Island last year as a significant step in having meetings that dealt with racial division.

On the flip side, Ms. Parker said it was that growth in segregation that also made Michigan an attractive target for supporters of the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative.

The ballot proposal, still subject to having its signatures checked by state elections officials, would prohibit affirmative action programs in state and local governments and universities.

"The folks from out of town funding this said, 'Let's go to Michigan because they've got all the elements to make it work,'" Ms. Parker said.

The Civil Rights Commission has adopted a resolution opposing the measure, but Ms. Parker said commissioners and others need to work in the coming months to inform voters of the potential effects of the proposal. "I'd like to see the commission and others in the state engage in some really informed dialogue on the affirmative action initiative," she said.

While the issue has been aimed at racial programs, Ms. Parker said it would also affect gender-based programs, possibly cutting into the gains women have made in the workforce and the education community in recent decades.

"When people hear 'affirmative action', it's blacks and other people of color going to get some unfair benefit," she said. "It's not well known the advances women get from affirmative action. All of these benefits for women I'm convinced will go away."

Finding the solution to segregation in the state could help to head off growth in complaints to the department, the investigation of which is one of its primary roles.

"The number of calls we've seen in the last year really represents an increase over what we've seen in years past," she said. "We are 133 strong and there are many, many needs in the state of Michigan."

Past directors have worked to reduce the time it takes to investigate and resolve complaints, but Ms. Parker said she hopes to take that one step further over the coming year.

Investigators will be working to collect more information from complainants early on to better determine not only the issues involved, but whether there is an actionable complaint. "We're really look at ways we can be more efficient in the enforcement process," she said. "Perhaps there will be more time available for the other aspects of our work."

But she said any changes cannot affect the due process rights of either party in a complaint.

Ms. Parker said finding the cause of and solutions to segregation could also build on the department's newest role: consultant.

"The department is seen by so many communities as an expert," she said.

The department provides diversity training for a variety of public and private entities around the state, but is also expanding on its efforts to help communities deal with emerging civil rights issues.

Department staff were sent into a number of school districts last year to help end spats of racial violence. "The school leadership was really at a loss with how to deal with it," Ms. Parker said.

The department provided training for the districts' staff on dealing with racial issues, but it also helped to create councils to bring parents together to discuss and work to resolve the issues.

The department also worked with the city of Howell after an antiques dealer there announced an auction of Ku Klux Klan memorabilia.

"That community is seen as being a non-welcoming community," Ms. Parker said. "What happens when you don't know how to deal with your image?"

Department staff are working with community leaders to reverse the image that the community is not open to racial diversity and to try to attract minority business owners. She said at least one minority-owned business looked at opening in the city but decided against the move after employees said they were not comfortable moving to Howell.

Working with employers and communities is also part of an effort to expand the civil rights expertise base in the state, Ms. Parker said. Noting again the department's diminished number of employees and its expected budget cuts for the coming year, she said the department needs assistance in completing its work.

"We're trying to get more friends," Ms. Parker said. "Working cooperatively is the number one thing we can do."

The department is working, for instance, to develop "train the trainer" programs that would allow other organizations to conduct some of the training now relegated solely to department staff.

Ms. Parker said she is also working on ways to collect fees for the training it does provide, particularly to private employers.

Ms. Parker and her staff are also working with the Civil Rights Commission in attaining its goal of public awareness. "They want to write more on civil rights; they want to have higher visibility," she said.

Part of the effort to raise the visibility of the commission has been to move its meetings. Where traditionally the commission has meant monthly either in Lansing or Detroit, the meetings this year have been moved to every other month, but also have been moved around the state.

"It's really an eye opener to see that community and what residents of that community are concerned about," Ms. Parker said.

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